

Testimony of **Jennifer Roemhildt**

Executive Director, Lost Coin/Nea Zoi

4 May 2006

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on International Relations

Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights, and International Operations

Good afternoon. My name is Jennifer Roemhildt, and I am the founder and executive director of the NGO Nea Zoi: Association for the Support and Restoration of Individuals Involved in Prostitution in Athens, Greece. On behalf of the women I serve – many of whom might just as easily have found themselves in Germany this summer – I thank you for the time and effort you are expending to address and prevent the deep trauma which trafficking inflicts on women. Your role in defending them against this violation honors you.

Our organization has been actively involved in street work in Athens for eight years, meeting women and men in prostitution in the brothels, bars, hotels and streets where they work, and making contact with between 100-150 individuals weekly. Although prostitution is legal in Greece, very few of our contacts work within the system. One recent estimate suggests that the total number of women in prostitution in Greece is near 13,000. Of that number, less than ten percent are legally registered and able to access the health benefits and other support services needed.

The vast majority of unregistered prostitutes in Greece are victims of trafficking, and the challenges facing these women are compounded by the Greek Government's unwieldy response to the need for clear, realistic, and broadly understood means for victim identification. Victims of human trafficking in Greece are still regularly issued deportation orders as illegal immigrants. Countries of origin include, but are not limited to: Albania, Bulgaria, Moldova, Nigeria, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine. The largest single group is women from Nigeria, comprising nearly 40% of Lost Coin's total contacts.

In anticipation of increased demand for prostitution around the Athens Olympics in 2004, Lost Coin and other NGOs began planning intervention and outreach targeting the young women we expected to be trafficked into Athens.

During the Olympics in Sydney, experts estimate that 10,000 women flooded the city to meet the demand for sexual services. In Athens, police began monitoring outgoing emails as known traffickers searched the Balkans and Eastern Europe for victims. . .young women speaking English, French, or German. . .young women with big problems or big dreams that would dispose them to taking big risks. In the months leading up to August 2004, one academic familiar with traffickers and routes warned of an "influx" of as many as 2,000 women over the weeks of the Athens Games.

The Greek Government responded by increasing security on land and sea borders, training 'trafficking monitors' to ride motorcycle patrol through areas known for illegal prostitution, by funding the creation of leaflets on sexual health and sexually transmitted diseases (targeting the women), and by arranging for access to free legal aid for victims of trafficking in each of the five

Olympic cities (through agreements with the local bar associations in each city). No initiatives were taken addressing the demand side of the equation.

In a decision which starkly divided Greek society, the municipality of Athens chose to license more brothels. The international community joined local advocacy groups in criticizing the Athens authorities for expanding the availability of prostitution during the Games. The city's stated goal was to force illegal brothels to meet minimum age and health standards or face closure. However, efforts at securing compliance were met with a major strike of the prostitutes' union. The pressure from the strikers led the city government to relax its rules, further easing zoning restrictions on brothels and removing other barriers to expansion. Lobbying by Greek feminist groups was successful in stopping plans for major hotel-like mega-brothels, similar to those which will be in operation during the World Cup.

Local NGOs prepared literature campaigns aimed at providing assistance to women trafficked into Greece, increased frequency of their street work, and created new teams for data gathering (specifically around the trafficking of children). Lost Coin sought to extend its network of victim support services in possible countries of origin (and repatriation) and to locate materials on sexual health, basic human rights, and spiritual counsel in those languages. Bi-lingual and multi-lingual outreach volunteers speaking the languages of the region were also actively cultivated.

Coordination and cooperation among NGOs across a broad spectrum of political conviction and faith positions were significant components of the anti-trafficking message.

Street work during the Olympics yielded unexpected results: we were not meeting new victims of trafficking. Of the new faces, few were identifiable as victims of trafficking, and even fewer had entered the country recently. Our experience seemed to hold up around the city: no increase in prostitution around the Athens Olympics. It became a matter of national, and then international, news. The Greek Union of Prostitutes even reported a decrease in demand compared to the previous year. Why?

While I am sure that the measures taken by the government were to good effect, they alone are insufficient to explain this result, and I am aware of no other attempts to explain the static, even declining, demand.

Today, as we observe our National Day of Prayer, I would like to suggest the surprising, and perhaps difficult to measure, effects of Divine Intervention. If it is appropriate for a nation to acknowledge dependence upon God, how much more a small organization caught in the throes of a global problem! Lost Coin intentionally sought prayer from friends, churches and supporters worldwide for those most vulnerable to being trafficked. We thank God for holding back the flood.

Trafficking is a trap. And an event like the World Cup – or the Olympics – is the bait. Pushed by poverty, pulled by hopeful dreams of life in the West, and exploited by opportunists, women suspend disbelief and their better judgment and gamble on a better life. Most gamblers lose.

The outrage we see and feel at inviting women to a rigged game – within the context of this international sporting event – must become the impetus for action. As a European NGO, Lost Coin calls for:

- Chancellor Merkel to speak out against the victimization of women through prostitution and trafficking in her country
- Protection, reparation, and the compassionate provision of services to victims of trafficking within Germany, including shelter, legal aid, counseling, and the aggressive pursuit of viable economic alternatives for their rehabilitation and reintegration into society
- Appropriate and proactive measures for victim identification, including training for police and NGO personnel. Members of the 21 German NGOs offering services should be enabled to gain access to the women in brothels, private clubs and escort services, on the streets and in other locations they may be found, as well as in detention facilities throughout Germany
- Aggressive measures to address the demand for purchased sexual services. Lost Coin congratulates the German NGOs for their foresight in creating and offering a hotline to clients as well as victims, and urges decisive action on the part of the German Government in punishing traffickers and those who purchase the services of these women

Finally, we invite the world's heroes – those athletes the World Cup celebrates – to become TRUE heroes as they speak out against the exploitation of women around the Cup and other sporting events.

Lost Coin opposes legalized prostitution, believing that all prostitution is profoundly traumatizing and assaults the dignity and worth of women. Legalized prostitution feeds the unhealthy appetites of a nation, and allows for the creation of infrastructure and suspension of moral judgment which pave the way for trafficking. No nation with legalized prostitution should have Tier 1 status on America's TIP report.